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ABSTRACT

Training tutors to help students with study skills and content-reading strategies, as well as to assist with course work, can broaden the role of tutors. Handouts for tutors have been developed that adapt traditional reading/study strategies for use in specific disciplines, sometimes with specific textbooks in mind. Tutors should also emphasize techniques for mastering vocabulary, because content-area material is often cumulative in structure, requiring the student to understand one concept or term before learning another. Word lists from the textbooks or the general literature of a discipline can be used to help students with the pronunciations, derivations, and specific meanings of the vocabulary needed in their studies. Tutors that use these techniques help their students to become more efficient and independent learners. (RL)

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"Training Tutors to Teach Students Reading Strategies in the Content Areas"

by Carole M. Johnson

The use of tutors to supplement traditional academic instruction has long been a feature of educational opportunity programs at all levels of education in the United States. In fact, these tutorial components have been acknowledged as a major factor contributing to student success in these programs, primarily because of the one-to-one arrangement which seems to work best with students experiencing low self-esteem as well as academic difficulties, characteristics which plague the educationally and economically disadvantaged student. An interesting phenomena resulting from the existence of these tutorial services within the structure of colleges and universities has been that more and more of the traditional students have been utilizing these services.

To those of us supervising these programs, it has become increasingly apparent that both the traditional and nontraditional students share essentially the same difficulties in learning once on campus (poor academic preparation in high school being a given). Large classes, which make it impossible for an instructor to be accessible to all students, and instructors, who inadvertently impose additional hardships on students because they are generally untrained in learning theory and teaching methodology, as well as difficult and badly written textbooks are only a few of the reasons tutors are necessary. The students themselves, finding it difficult to read critically, to organize material (a prerequisite for learning it), and to discriminate between important ideas and supporting details, tend to resist the personal involvement necessary for success in a learning situation. Tutors, if judiciously selected and properly trained, can alleviate this situation to a certain extent. As the students' peers and as a manifestation of an outreach philosophy not often encountered in the traditional academic setting, tutors appear to students less threatening and more readily accessible than instructors. If tutors are structured and disciplined

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in their own study habits, yet enthusiastic about their subject area and flexible and sensitive to individual needs, they can not only instruct, but serve as effective role models as well, encouraging and persuading their students that they too can succeed.

When I first began supervising a tutorial component as part of an educational opportunity program for college level students, it became very apparent to me that though students asked for a tutor because they were experiencing difficulty with course content, in most cases, they could not understand the material because they could not get at it. In other words, they simply could not read the textbook with the degree of comprehension necessary for mastery of the material. This was just as true for the student reading on the sixth grade level as the one reading on the tenth or eleventh grade level. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that college students are expected to learn material from textbooks that are not only two to four grade levels above their own independent reading levels, but that are badly written as well. This predicament is compounded for the nontraditional student, already overburdened with too many skills deficiencies. While we can certainly hope that faculty will be sensitive enough to the situation to employ alternative teaching methods, it is unrealistic to assume that they will begin to select textbooks to match the reading levels of their students (though more and more publishing companies are moving in this direction).

Traditionally, the most realistic and practical method of dealing with this dilemma has been to teach students the appropriate reading strategies for the various kinds and levels of textbooks they are required to read, generally through a course. However, a reading course, whether credit or noncredit, is not always feasible, especially for those students in math, the sciences, and

the allied health fields with tightly structured curricula. Moreover, it seems to be generally true that skills taught out of any specific context do not always carry over. So, out of necessity, it seemed to me a good idea to train my tutors in the appropriate reading strategies and study skills for their particular disciplines so that they could in turn show their students how to use them. The necessity for immediate application of these strategies and skills--an ideal learning situation--means that students can actually improve their study skills, utilize their study time to maximum effectiveness, and most important, develop into independent learners.

Though reading strategies for the various disciplines involve the same basic steps--survey, question, read, recite, review (and all the variations thereof)--it has been my experience that most students are not interested in a general application. They want assistance in an immediate situation and with specific material. The handouts I have developed have basically the same strategies, but they are addressed to specific disciplines--physics, chemistry, math, etc. Moreover, I have encorporated hints and suggestions supplied by faculty and tutors which makes these materials applicable and useful in ways that commercially developed materials are not. It is also a relatively simple matter to utilize textbooks that are currently being used, especially in the introductory courses. At Oakland for example, one of the basic biology courses uses Helene Curtis' Biology (3rd edition), which provides summaries for each chapter. One tutor found that an effective study technique was to have the student read the chapter without reading the summary, write his own summary, and then compare it with the textbooks' summary. This suggestion, along with actual examples from the textbook, appears in a handout available to all students and instructors.

In addition to training tutors in reading strategies in their specific disciplines, I also emphasize techniques for mastering vocabulary. Since math and science courses are cumulative, that is, the understanding of one concept is built on an understanding of another, it is absolutely essential that the student learn concepts correctly and thoroughly as they are presented in the course. One important way to do this is through vocabulary because key terms in math and science often represent major concepts. Moreover, much of math and science terminology is so specialized (i.e. "molar" has a specific meaning in chemistry that it does not have in biology) that if students are not aware of the specific meaning of the term in the context of the discipline, their understanding of a crucial passage may be totally wrong. A large number of technical and scientific terms are based on a relatively small number of basic word elements, mostly Latin, Greek, and some cases German and French. If the student can learn to analyze scientific terms, breaking them down into their basic elements, he will be able to more easily learn and remember the terminology in his math and science courses. In addition to the usual lists of word roots, prefixes, and suffixes, I have developed lists of words from textbooks currently being used. Too often, vocabulary is studied out of any meaningful context, and most students simply do not have the motivation to improve their vocabulary if they cannot see any immediate benefits. This is especially true for students with genuine remediation problems or those who are educationally disadvantaged.

Though there are many excellent books on vocabulary and spelling available, only the most motivated students will seek them out and use them on their own. To remedy this situation, I developed lists of words based on textbooks the students were using. Though these lists are by no means comprehensive--and they should not be--they give a student a quick look at the vocabulary he will

be faced with in a particular subject. Lists like these, though appearing formidable at first, can be used in several ways by the student and the tutor depending on the needs of the student:

1. Pronunciation: Becoming familiar with hearing the words will help the student in class during lecture and in the tutoring sessions.

2. Derivation: The student can see (or be shown) at a glance that many of the words are derived from the same roots and that the list is not so formidable after all.

3. Specific Meanings: The student is made aware that many words he uses in his general vocabulary have specific meanings in science and math.

4. General/Professional Vocabulary: If math or science is the student's major field of study, these words will have to become a permanent part of his vocabulary. Selective lists, a structured alternative to vocabulary scattered throughout a 500 page textbook or clustered in a formidable glossary, are conducive to this acquisition. An attractive side benefit is that the student's general vocabulary will improve as well.

In summary, the role of a tutor can be broadened considerably beyond that of a teaching assistant to supplement course instruction, in most cases a short range situation. If tutors can be trained to show their students study skills and strategies as well as assisting them in their course work, then the tutorial experience becomes a long range situation, that is, the students learn how to learn, thus becoming more efficient and independent learners.

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